

# PERSONALITY PLUS

## The "Spacey" Child

"*Earth to Harry. Earth to Harry. Do you read me? Is anyone home up there?*" How can some children be so mentally absent? Where do they go? Why is it so difficult for them to pay attention?

One of the causes of "spaciness" that we've uncovered at the Gifted Child Development Center is chronic early ear infections. Children who had difficulty tuning in during their first few years of life, due to technical difficulties with their hearing apparatus, become excellent at tuning out. Research on *otitis media* (ear infections) indicates that children who have had **more than 9 ear infections** in the first 3 years (only 3 per year) are at greater risk for inattention in class, and may struggle with phonics, comprehension, and other school tasks (Feagans, 1986).

Some of the children we've seen had 25 or more ear infections. And parents have reported, "Our son only had 1 ear infection: it lasted from 3 months to 3 years." It stands to reason that children who had this much difficulty hearing during the critical period in which they were learning how to learn would not be adept at listening skills. Even when the ear infections are cleared up, and the child's acuity appears to be "normal," the processing of auditory stimuli tends to remain weak.

The following symptoms appear more prevalent in children with a significant history of *otitis media*: difficulties with attention, articulation, phonics, spelling memorization, timed tests, sequencing, reversals, handwriting, and long written assignments (Silverman, 1989). They may ask to have directions repeated. Paradoxically, they may be excellent at very complex tasks, yet struggle with simple ones. For example, they usually excel at math reasoning, but are terrible at computation.

What should you do about the space cadets in your family or classroom? Here are some concrete ideas:

- **Touch** their shoulders to get their attention.
- Get **eye contact** before talking to them.
- Talk **louder** to them during each ear infection, and for several weeks afterward.
- **Limit** the number of **directions** you give them at one time.
- **Show** them, don't tell them. For these children, a picture is worth a thousand words.
- Let them **observe** others before attempting new tasks. They learn by watching.
- Use **visualization** techniques. (See *Jeff Freed's article*)
- Teach them to use **computers** and let them do assignments with the assistance of a word processor.
- **Shorten** written assignments. Grade on ideas, not mechanics.
- **Avoid timed tests**. If they must take them, let them compete against their own past record, rather than with other children.

- Buy a ***Bad Speller's Dictionary*** (organized by misspellings!) and allow them to look up words.
- Give them **advanced work** even when they haven't mastered simple, sequential tasks.
- Engage a **tutor** who can help them learn to use their strengths to compensate for their weaknesses.

These techniques may not cure the problem, but they will help "spacey" children be more successful in school.

(NOTE: For more information, see "*Invisible Gifts, Invisible Handicaps.*")

### REFERENCES

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